

PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT CYCLE

Developing Performance Standards

While performance elements tell employees what they have to do, the standards tell them how well they have to do it. The first article in this series defined and reviewed the characteristics of critical, non-critical, and additional performance elements. This article reviews the principles of writing good standards that can be used effectively to appraise employee performance of those elements.

Definition

A performance standard is a management-approved expression of the performance threshold(s), requirement(s), or expectation(s) that must be met to be appraised at a particular level of performance. A Fully Successful (or equivalent) standard must be established for each critical element and included in the employee performance plan. If other levels of performance are used by the appraisal program, writing standards for those levels and including them in the performance plan is not required but is encouraged so that employees will know what they have to do to meet standards higher than Fully Successful.

General Measures

Performance standards should be objective, measurable, realistic, and stated clearly in writing (or otherwise recorded). The standards should be written in terms of specific measures that will be used to appraise performance. In order to develop specific measures, you first must determine the general measure(s) that are important for each element. General measures used to measure employee performance include the following:

- Quality addresses how well the work is performed and/or how accurate or how effective the final product is. Quality refers to accuracy, appearance, usefulness, or effectiveness.
- Quantity addresses how much work is produced. A quantity measure can be expressed as an error rate, such as number or percentage of errors allowable per unit of work, or as a general result to be achieved. When a quality or quantity standard is set, the Fully Successful standard should be high enough to be challenging but not so high that it is not really achievable.
- Timeliness addresses how quickly, when or by what date the work is produced. The most common error made in setting timeliness standards is to allow no margin for error. As with other standards, timeliness standards should be set realistically in view of other performance requirements and needs of the organization.
- Cost-Effectiveness addresses dollar savings to the Government or working within a budget. Standards that address cost-effectiveness should be based on specific resource levels (money, personnel, or time) that generally can be documented and measured in agencies' annual fiscal year budgets. Cost-effectiveness standards may include such aspects of performance as maintaining or reducing unit costs, reducing the time it takes to produce a product or service, or reducing waste.

For each element, decide which of these general measurers are important to the performance of the element by asking the following questions:

- Is quality important? Does the stakeholder or customer care how well the work is done?
- Is quantity important? Does the stakeholder or customer care how many are produced?
- Is it important that the element be accomplished by a certain time or date?
- Is it important that the element be done within certain cost limits?

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Specific Measures

Once you've decided which general measures are important, you can develop specific measurers. It is these specific measures that will be included in the standard. To develop specific measure(s) for each element, you must determine how you would measure the quantity, quality, timeliness, and/or cost-effectiveness of the element. If it can be measured with numbers, clearly define those numbers. If performance only can be described (i.e., observed and verified), clarify who would be the best judge to appraise the work and what factors they would look for. (The first-line supervisor is often the best person to judge performance, but there may be situations, depending on what is being measured, when a peer or the customer receiving the product or service would be the best judge.)

The following questions may help you determine specific measures. For each general measure, ask:

- How could [quality, quantity, timeliness, and/or cost effectiveness] be measured?
- Is there some number or percent that could be tracked?

If there is no number, and the element can only be judged, ask:

- Who could judge that the element was done well? What factors would they look for?

Writing Standards

Once you've established the specific measures that apply to the elements, you can begin to write the standards. Before writing the Fully Successful standard, you must know the number of levels that your appraisal program uses to appraise elements. For example, if you are under an appraisal program that uses two levels to appraise elements, the Fully Successful standard would describe a single point of performance, above which is Fully Successful, and below which is Unacceptable. If, however, your appraisal program uses five levels to appraise elements, you would describe the Fully Successful standard as a range, above which is higher than Fully Successful, and below which would be Minimally Successful (or equivalent). How you write the Fully Successful standard depends on the number of levels your program uses to appraise elements.

If a specific measure for an element is numeric, for example, you would list the units to be tracked and determine the range of numbers (or the single number in a program that appraises elements at two levels) that represents Fully Successful performance. If the specific measure is descriptive, you would identify the judge, list the factors that the judge would look for, and determine what he or she would see or report that verifies that Fully Successful performance for that element had been met.

Examples

Included below are examples of elements and standards. The specific measures are in italics; the performance (or range of performance) that actually establishes the level of the standard are in boldface type.

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Element: Guidance and Technical Assistance

Fully Successful Standard in an appraisal program that appraises elements at five levels (to meet this standard, all of the bullets listed must be present or occur):

- No more than 3-8% errors per quarter, as determined by the supervisor.
- At least 60-80% of customers agree that the employee is willing to assist and that the information they receive is helpful.
- Employee initially responds to customer requests for assistance within at least 1-8 working hours from receipt of request.

(If this standard had been written for an appraisal program that appraised elements at only two levels, the standard would have been "no more than 8% errors per quarter, "at least 60% of customers agree," and "up to 8 working hours from receipt of request.")

Element: Team Participation

Fully Successful Standard in an appraisal program that appraises elements at five levels (to meet this standard, all of the bullets listed must be present or occur):

The supervisor and team members are satisfied that the incumbent:

- Usually assumes an appropriate amount of work/responsibility for group projects;
- Typically demonstrates a willingness to assume other responsibilities as needed; and
- Generally shares knowledge of office procedures/equipment with other members of the team.

Element: Analytical Results and Specifications

Fully Successful Standard in an appraisal program that appraises elements at five levels (to meet this standard, all of the bullets listed must be present or occur):

The Research Manager is routinely satisfied that:

- The method measures that appropriate variable.
- The results are relevant.
- The method is scientifically sound.
- There is a well-written protocol.
- The method is accurate, precise, reproducible, fast, and cost-effective.

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